



A ground-based interceptor missile is emplaced in July 2006 at the Missile Defense Complex, Fort Greely, Alaska. Alaska's location makes the state a critical component of the nation's ballistic missile defense system. (Photo courtesy of the U.S. Army)

# Why Alaska and the Arctic are Critical to the National Security of the United States

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**O**ver the past five years, Russia has moved aggressively to build its Arctic military capabilities, apparently in an effort to secure its claims and

interests in the region.<sup>1</sup> Increasingly, human activity is occurring in the Arctic as the sea ice recedes and economic opportunity opens to nations via new shipping

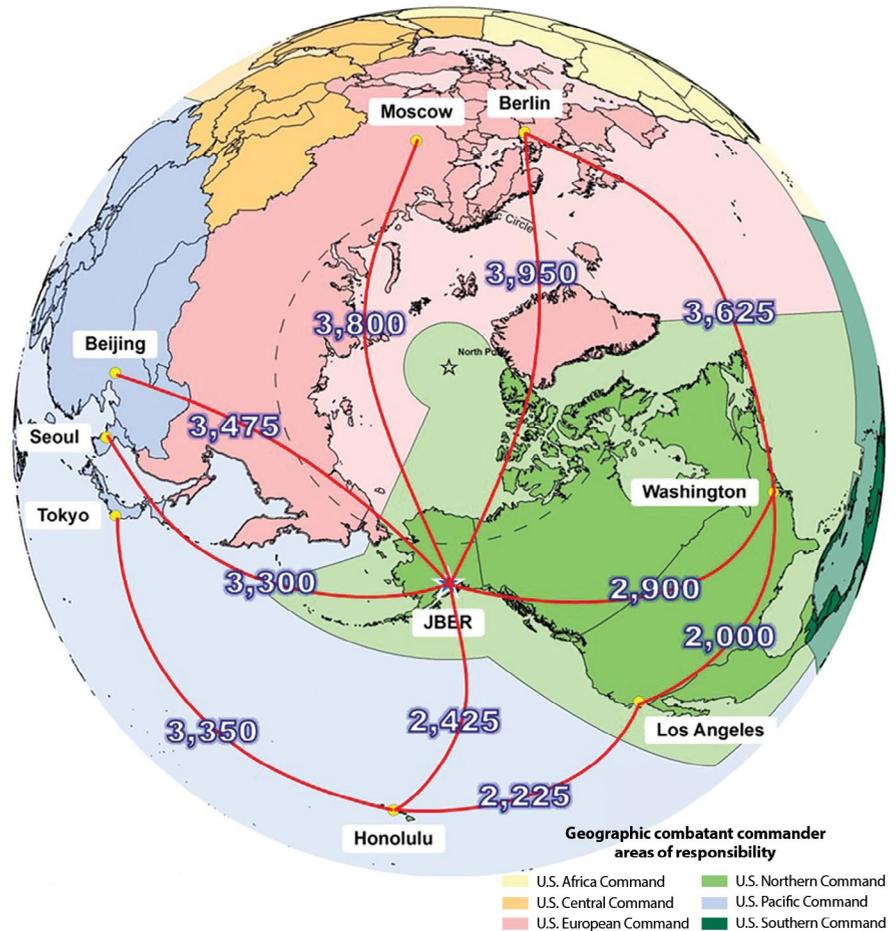
lanes. Characteristically, in any geographical area, with the rise in human activity there is also the corresponding possibility that friction will occur as people compete to exploit the natural resources and corresponding economic possibilities. Such friction—and potential conflict—in the Arctic is highly likely at some point unless preparations are made to mitigate it.

Alaska makes the United States an Arctic nation, and its location places the state and country at the center of this fast-evolving region.<sup>2</sup> Thus, Alaska is critical to the national security of the United States; however, we are not, as a nation, keeping pace with the rapidly changing security situation in the Arctic. Lagging here could also have an enormous impact on our economy. To change this dynamic, there are several things that the U.S. military can do to ensure the future security of the region.

## Alaska's Geostrategic Importance

"Alaska is the most strategic place on earth," stated Brig. Gen. Billy Mitchell in testimony before Congress in 1935.<sup>3</sup> The reason for this bold statement is that Alaska is the closest U.S. location to the center of the Northern Hemisphere (see figure 1). The state is singularly closer to many national capitals in the hemisphere than most points in the lower forty-eight states. This makes Alaska the perfect power projection platform for the United States from a military standpoint. Further, because Alaska sits astride the Bering Strait chokepoint and the Great Circle Routes between North America and Asia as can be seen in figure 2 (on page 115), it is critical to our economic and national security.<sup>4</sup>

The air lanes and sea lanes of the Great Circle Routes are heavily trafficked by shipping companies because



(Graphic courtesy of North American Aerospace Defense Command [NORAD], used in an Alaskan Command and Alaska NORAD Region command briefing. Alaska is close to the center of the hemisphere and Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson [JBER] is uniquely positioned to project power. The distances depicted in nautical miles are to select world capitals from JBER.)

**Figure 1. The Northern Hemisphere from the Perspective of the North Pole**

they shorten the distance between the two continents, saving time and money for shippers. Consequently, the city of Anchorage and Alaska are at the center of existing commercial shipping lanes between East and West. Anchorage, at roughly the halfway point between the major commerce centers of North America and Asia, is an important hub for such international corporations as Federal Express and DHL.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, many nations such as China and Russia are routinely making use of these routes for their economic benefit.

However, while Alaska is critical to intercontinental shipping now, emerging routes due to shrinking ice impediments could raise the state's economic stature to even greater heights. The retreat of ice coverage in the Arctic Ocean has opened up the potential for shipping along the Northern Sea Route and the fabled Northwest

Passage (see figure 3, page 116).<sup>6</sup> The Northern Sea Route parallels Russia's Arctic coastline, as much of it is within the country's exclusive economic zone. In the past few years, shipping along this route has increased, topping out with seventy-one passages in 2013.<sup>7</sup> Moving goods along this route cuts off thousands of miles, saving

difficult to navigate due to remaining heavy ice pack, continued ice retreat could make this route feasible in the future. Alaska's position on the east side of the Bering Strait places the state in a central position on the choke point of both routes. However, with increasing human activity, it is inevitable that disagreements

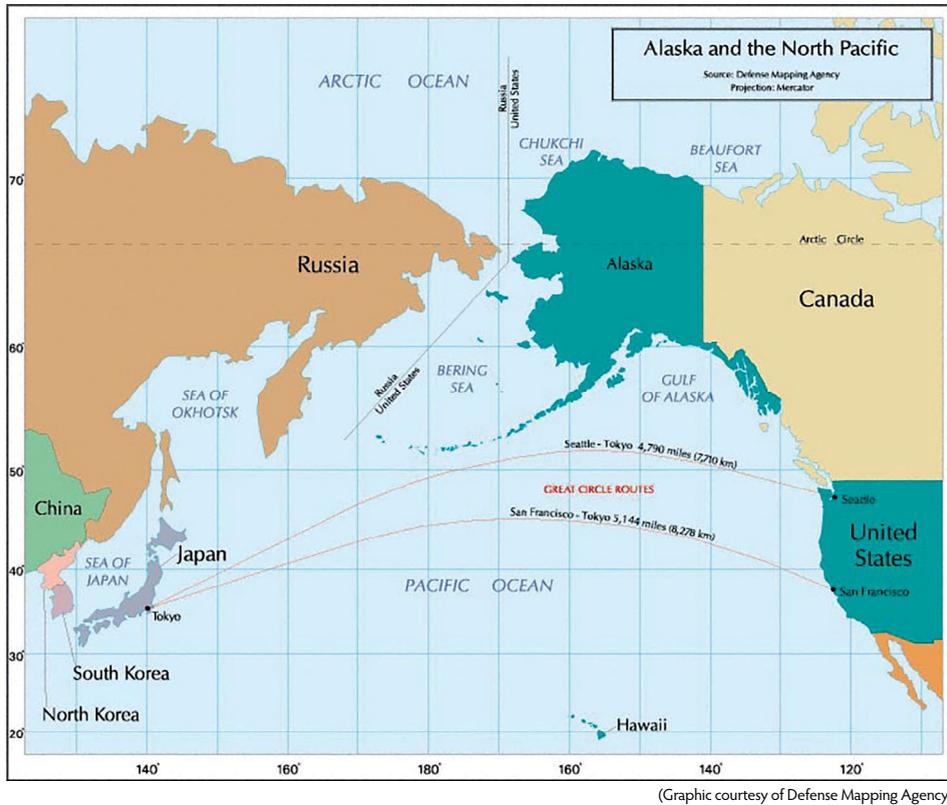
among nations making claims in the area will arise as competition heats up. Again, Alaska's location thrusts her to the forefront of strategic calculations that the United States must make to deal with emerging geopolitical and geo-economic circumstances.

Incidentally, what makes the Great Circle Route good for shipping also makes it the preferred route for the employment of missiles aimed at North America. As previously noted, this route shortens the distance between the two continents. Just as shippers prefer the route because the reduced distance saves time and money, the same principle of distance holds true for ballistic missiles. Potential adversaries could fire weapons along this

trajectory to close the distance more quickly while lessening the potential for early warning to their attacks. Thus, Alaska's location makes the state a critical component of the nation's ballistic missile defense system.

### Arctic Natural Resources

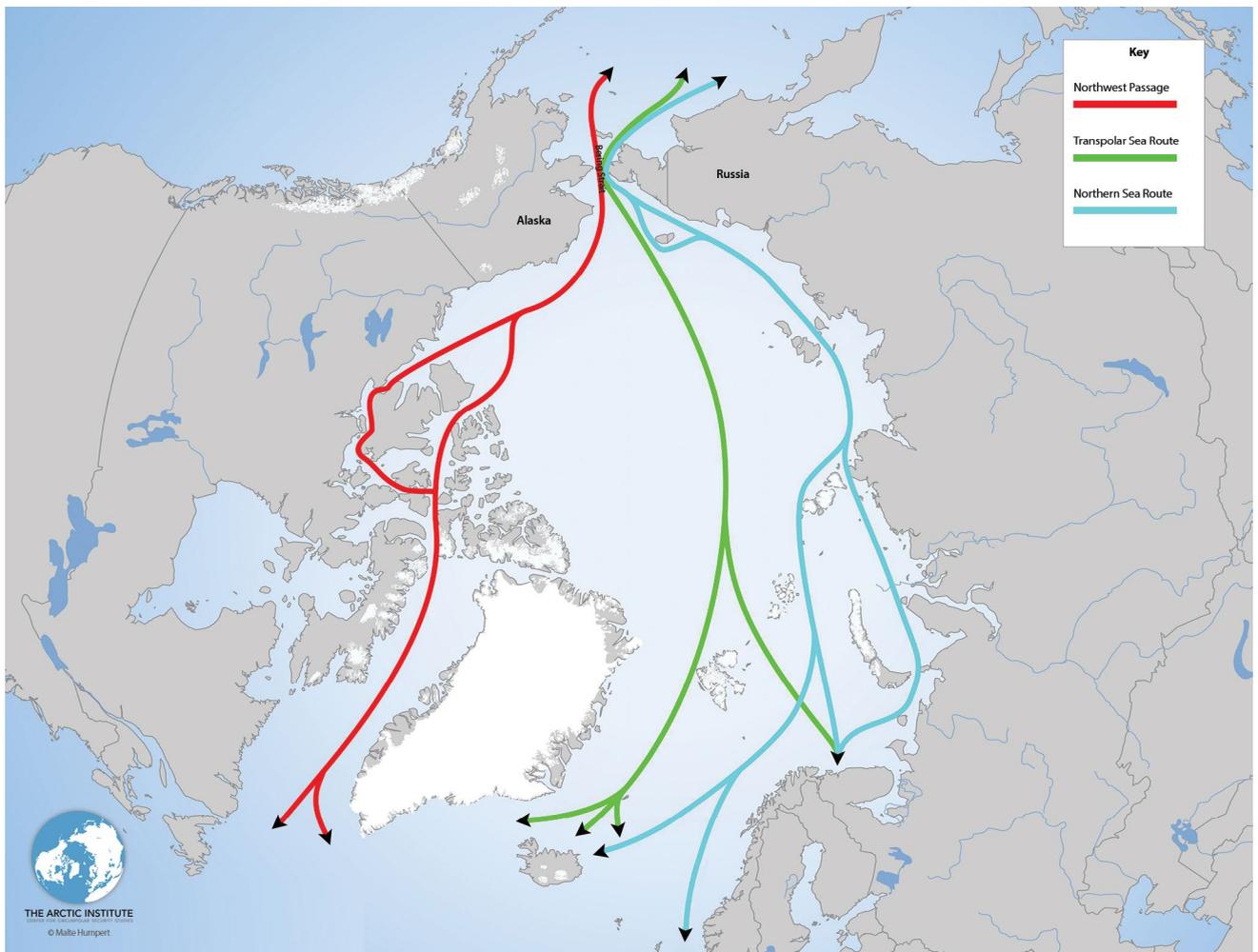
In addition to the great potential for shipping through the Arctic, there is considerable capacity for economic expansion based on the abundant natural resources in the region. There are across the entire Arctic oil, gas, coal, rare-earth metals, and fisheries. It is estimated that 13 percent of the undiscovered oil and 30 percent of the gas worldwide is in the region, along with a host of other resources.<sup>11</sup> As a result, Arctic nations are very interested in tapping into these to facilitate economic growth and



**Figure 2. The Great Circle Routes between North America and Asia**

money on fuel costs and insurance (since there are no pirates along this route).<sup>8</sup> Moreover, Russia is facilitating passages through the use of its large icebreaker fleet, making her an indispensable player in shipping through the High North while profiting from such transit by charging fees for services akin to a toll.<sup>9</sup>

Thus, the emerging Northwest Passage has recently become a possibility for shippers. For centuries, explorers and adventurers sought a route from Europe to Asia across Canada's High North. Most of these individuals failed in this attempt, but now the dream is nearing reality. In 2017, the luxury cruise liner *Crystal Serenity* made a trip through the Northwest Passage starting from Seward, Alaska, and terminating in New York City.<sup>10</sup> While much of the Northwest Passage remains



(Graphic by Malte Humpert, The Arctic Institute, <https://www.thearcticinstitute.org/future-arctic-shipping/>)

**Figure 3. Potential Shipping Lanes through the Arctic Ocean**

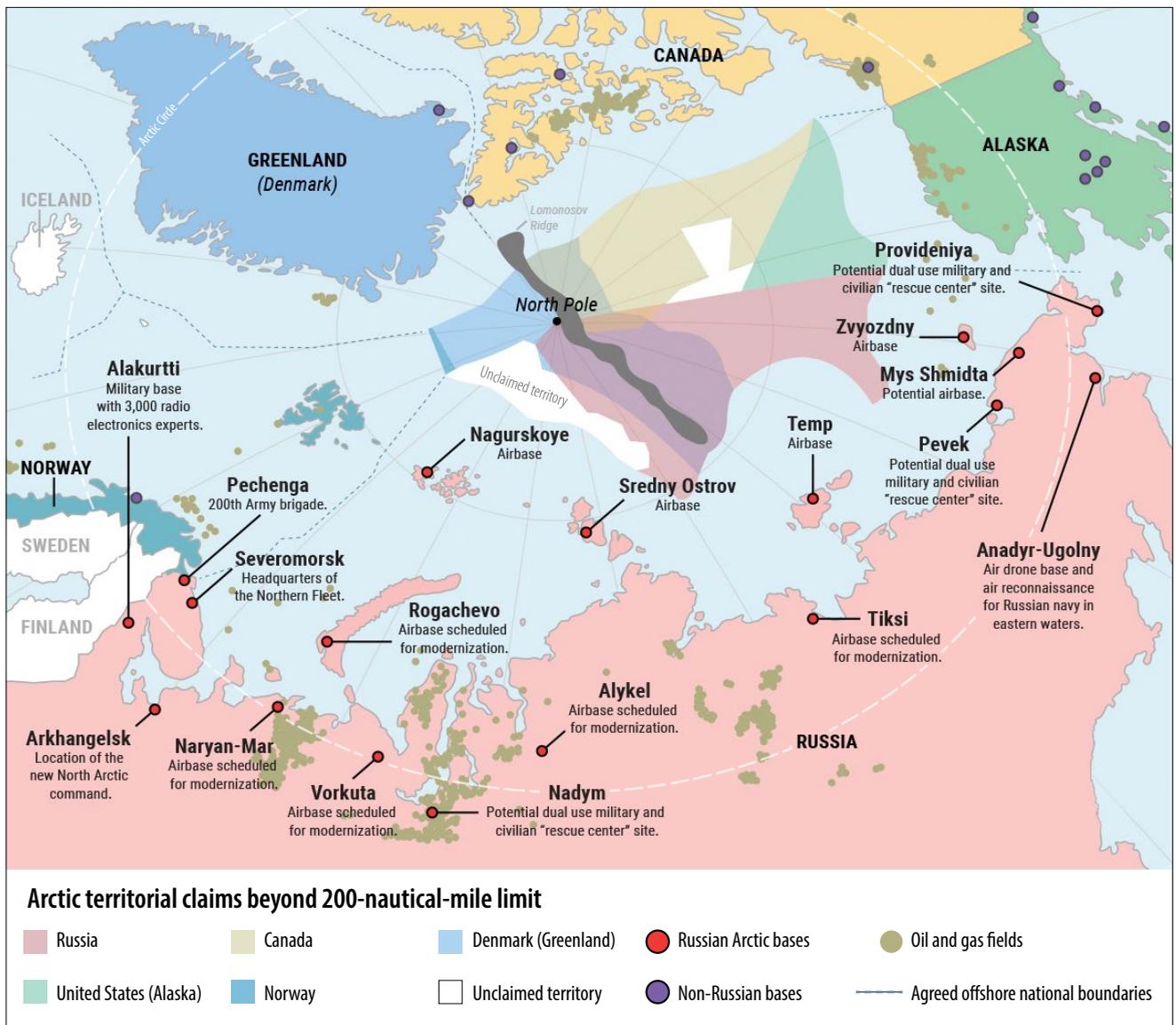
generate revenue. The retreat of sea ice and glacial melt is making these resources more accessible to Arctic and interested near-Arctic nations like China.

The desire to obtain this mineral and energy wealth is stimulating competition among these countries. All of the Arctic nations have made claims beyond their exclusive economic zones on the outer continental shelf so that they have exclusive right to exploit these resources (see figure 4, page 117). Claims are made under the auspices of the United Nations (UN), which then adjudicates them according to the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea. The problem is that many of these claims overlap, complicating the UN's ability to judge in a manner satisfactory to all the claimants. This in turn gives rise to friction among the nations as they increasingly confront each other. Herein lies the potential for

conflict in the Arctic region, which has heretofore been known for regional cooperation and peace.

### Sources of Conflict

The obvious source for possible conflict is the increasing human contact and the claims put forth by the various Arctic nations. One nation making such claims in the Arctic region has made a concerted effort to assert or expand its sovereignty in other areas of the globe recently; that nation is Russia. The Russian Federation already derives 20 percent of its gross domestic product from economic activity in the Arctic, and its claims would expand its reach to make further economic growth possible.<sup>12</sup> Over the past five-plus years, Russia has systematically embarked on a program to establish new or refurbish abandoned



(Graphic by Mike Nudelman, Business Insider, <http://www.businessinsider.com/russia-equipped-six-military-bases-in-the-arctic-2015-12>; modified by extending key and adding the Arctic Circle)

**Figure 4. Existing and Newly Constructed Military Bases Established by Russia in the Arctic Region Today Compared to Other Nations**

military bases in the Arctic (see figure 4). The reasons for this effort include providing protection to the emerging Northern Sea Route and securing its economic interests. As already noted, the Northern Sea Route has the potential to provide great benefit to Russia through direct trade or the facilitation of trade between Asia and Europe. Further, should Russia win its claims on the outer continental shelf, it will control vast areas and resources to its benefit.<sup>13</sup> Thus, refurbishment and expansion of new bases is an effort to

secure what Russians believe is theirs. However, this gives rise to the strong possibility of conflict if other nations do not accept Russian claims.

A reason for concern that Russia may press its claims even if the UN decides against it is based upon recent developments in other regions. As we have seen over the past four years, Russia has aggressively pressed forward with territorial claims in its “near abroad” at the expense of Russia’s neighbors.<sup>14</sup> Russia annexed Crimea from Ukraine in a brazen

land grab. Later, under the pretense of protecting ethnic Russians, it fomented a war with Ukraine to seize territory on its western border with Ukraine. Most recently, Russia has intervened in Syria on behalf of Bashar al-Assad's government to prop that regime up to ensure its survival as well as to enable Russia to gain access to new locations in Syria from which to stage both Russian air and sea power in the Mediterranean Sea and Middle East. This raises the question, Would Russia move in a similarly aggressive manner to establish military hegemony and control over much of the Arctic?

## Mitigating the Risk of Conflict

Since, the Arctic region is so self-evidently important to the United States both economically and militarily, we must assert ourselves to ensure that the region remains peaceful and is of benefit to all nations as part of the global commons. So, what can the U.S. military do to ensure this outcome?

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First, we must ensure that we maintain and sustain a credible force in Alaska. Much recent discussion by senior political and military leaders has centered on cutting force structure in Alaska.<sup>15</sup> In particular, the Army has considered drawing down the airborne brigade combat team posted at Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson. This would send the wrong message to potential adversaries that the United States is not committed to protecting either its own interests and claims, or Arctic security in general. This might encourage aggressive actions on the part of

nations, most prominently Russia, seeking to seize and exploit opportunities within the Arctic region.

Second, U.S. forces must exercise frequently and visibly to demonstrate our capability to secure our interests in the Arctic. Such exercises should include joint forces and incorporate combined operations with Arctic partners. By conducting joint and combined exercises, we send a message to potential adversaries that we intend to secure our interests and those of our partners in the austere environment of the Arctic. Moreover, combined exercises demonstrate the interoperability of our forces with partner nations for a deterrent effect.

Third, U.S. military forces have to regain Arctic skills to enhance deterrence in the region. There is much work to be done. Over a decade of war focused on counterinsurgency in the desert environment of the Middle East and central Asia has left forces in Alaska with atrophied Arctic survival and tactical skills and antiquated equipment. Further, a major winter exercise in the Arctic targeted at the operational level of war has not occurred in several years. To have a credible deterrence to any nation's design for expansion in the Arctic, the United States has to systematically rebuild and demonstrate its Arctic skills and refurbish or field new equipment to give U.S. forces in Alaska a robust capability to challenge aggressors.

Fourth, U.S. forces in the Arctic require technological and equipment modernization. In the same way that Arctic skills have atrophied over the past decade-plus, so also has the equipment available to the force become either obsolete or difficult to maintain due to age. For example, early-warning defense radar systems require modernization as software becomes out of date and the purpose for which they were designed has evolved. Additionally, ground mobility suffers from an aged system that is difficult to maintain, making it a challenge to move ground forces in deep snow or mud. The M973 Small Unit Support Vehicle (SUSV) is not viable since it is no longer a program of record, and a material solution is required to enable greater mobility for ground forces in the Arctic. These are just two examples of equipping needs among many. The bottom line is that U.S. forces will require investment in materiel that facilitates operating in the tough conditions of the Arctic. This is essential to demonstrate our commitment to security in the region.

Finally, in conjunction with rebuilding Arctic forces' equipment and effectiveness, commanders in Alaska

need the authority to conduct military-to-military consultations with counterparts around the region. We maintain this with most Arctic nations through Alaskan Command's security cooperation line of effort. However, in 2013, all consultations with Russia were curtailed. Lack of regular contact with Russia continues to be a strategic gap that, with increased competition as well as the already tense relations that prevail between the two nations, could lead to misunderstandings and miscalculations between the United States and Russia and potentially result in needless conflict.

Regular consultation with Russia needs to be restored. The ability of commanders from U.S. Army Alaska and Alaskan Command to consult with counterparts in Russia would go far to reduce tension and assure clear communication between the two nations. This simple step could go a long way toward ensuring peace in the Arctic.

## Conclusion

The U.S. position in the Arctic because of Alaska is of enormous strategic significance. The United States has vital interests in the Arctic region that are

unfortunately often overlooked because turbulence in other areas of the world often draw more attention. In time, these interests will come to be seen as both critical and vital to our own long-term economic interests as well as security. Consequently, there is a need to ensure our interests in the Arctic are sufficiently secured to ensure resolutions to territorial and resource claims remain peaceful.

To effect protection of our interests, the United States has to assert leadership using critical elements of national power, including the military. We must rebuild long-ignored Arctic military capabilities to provide a credible deterrent to any nation that may want to expand its territory outside of recognized international norms to exploit the tremendous resources of the Arctic. As human activity continues to increase in the Arctic, it will become more and more important for the United States to demonstrate its strength in the region. Failure to do so could allow the friction of human interaction to grow into needless regional confrontation with global implications. This is preventable with a commitment to leadership and peace in the region that stems from sufficient investment and preparation. ■

## Notes

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2. Heather A. Conley and Jamie Kraut, *U.S. Strategic Interests in the Arctic: An Assessment of Current Challenges and New Opportunities for Cooperation* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic & International Studies [CSIS], 2010), 7.

3. Brian Garfield, *The Thousand Mile War: World War II in Alaska and the Aleutians* (1969; repr., Fairbanks, AK: University of Alaska Press, 1995), 59.

4. "Alaska and the North Pacific," Alaska Humanities Forum (website), accessed 8 November 2017, <http://www.akhistorycourse.org/images/geography/large/l3.jpg>.

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6. "Arctic Shipping Routes," The Arctic Institute (website), accessed 8 November 2017, <https://www.thearcticinstitute.org/arctic-shipping-routes-high-res/>.

7. Heather A. Conley and Caroline Rohloff, *The New Ice Curtain: Russia's Strategic Reach to the Arctic* (Washington, DC: CSIS, 2015), 47 and 84.

8. Conley and Kraut, *U.S. Strategic Interests in the Arctic*, 6.

9. Conley and Rohloff, *The New Ice Curtain*, 48–49; Conley and Kraut, *U.S. Strategic Interests in the Arctic*, 7.

10. Brady Dennis and Chris Mooney, "Luxury Cruise Ship Sets Sail for the Arctic from Seward," *Alaska Dispatch News* (website), 18 August 2016, accessed 24 October 2017, <https://www.adn.com/arctic/2016/08/16/luxury-cruise-ship-sets-sail-for-the-arctic/>.

11. Stephanie Pezard et al., *Maintaining Arctic Cooperation with Russia: Planning for Regional Change in the Far North* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2017), 35–36.

12. Conley and Rohloff, *The New Ice Curtain*, vii.

13. *Ibid.*, 70; Pezard et al., *Maintaining Arctic Cooperation with Russia*, 10–12.

14. The term "near abroad" is one used by Russia and is defined as the fourteen recently independent republics on Russia's immediate border that emerged after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. *Encyclopedia of Russian History*, Encyclopedia.com, s.v. "near abroad," accessed 9 November 2017, <http://www.encyclopedia.com/history/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/near-abroad>.

15. Joe Gould, "Lawmakers Blast US Army Force Cuts," *Defense News* (website), 8 July 2015, accessed 6 September 2017, <https://www.defensenews.com/2015/07/08/lawmakers-blast-us-army-force-cuts/>; Erica Martinson, "Troop Cuts at Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson on Hold," *Alaska Dispatch News* (website), 7 October 2015, accessed 24 October 2017, <https://www.adn.com/military/article/jber-cuts-hold/2015/10/08/>. Since the original announcement of potential troop cuts, the Army has rescinded the decision, stabilizing the force structure at its current levels.